

QUO VADIS? PREDICTIONS ON THE PAST IN
AMERICAN MICRONESIA AND FRENCH POLYNESIA

by

William Tagupa

The decolonization process for the Pacific islands has been operative for more than two decades. Yet there remain two metropolitan powers which have yet to complete this often complex exercise — France and the United States. The urge to compare their historical signatures in French Polynesia and Micronesia is decidedly irresistible. While such an exercise would necessarily include a variety of viewpoints and a litany of events and scenarios, this essay's purpose is to focus on one feature which has dominated the destinies of these two areas in different ways — that is how time and space have influenced perceptions and reactions to the challenges of the past and the history of the future. Awareness is essentially a cultural characteristic which often distinguishes one particular society from another.

There are many ways in which men are made aware, or rather make themselves aware, of the passage of time — by the changing seasons, the alternations of the moon, or the progress of plant life; by the measured cycling of rites, or agricultural work, or household activities; by the preparation and

scheduling of projected acts and the memory and assessment of accomplished ones; by the preservation of genealogies, the recital of legends, or the framing of prophecies (Geertz 1973:389 emphasis added).

Things are placed in time as to the order of succession and in space to the order of situation. It is within the character of persons and groups to affect situations and the succession of events according to their own aspirations and sensibilities. This process determines how the past exists in the present or is predicted for the future.

It is the belief in a common history which creates the feeling that "people like us" have a future as well as a past. If the people of Oceania are to have a future in which they are something other than servile underdogs in an economic system which is run for the benefit of expatriate Europeans and white Americans then they need a history. But it must be a history in which the white skinned permanent residents of the region can also participate and likewise accept with pride.

... It follows from all this that the local archaeologists and ethnohistorians are not just exploring the past in a detached, objective, "scientific" atmosphere. They are creating something which relates to the political present and the political future (Leach 1983:102,103).

What is suggested by the foregoing and what is being asserted here is that the manipulation of time and space is as important as the manipulation of persons and events. With both the French Polynesian and Micronesian experiences in mind, this contention is especially applicable. To provide at least one example, one commentator observed:

... Ponapean accounts of their own history seem to emphasize distinctions in space over temporal chronology. Individuals, events, and changes seem to be linked together by variations in spatial organization. Events are marked by where they occur, and epochs are known by names that usually refer to particular groupings of places rather than periods (Peterson 1983).

It is proposed here that recent events, negotiations, and transactions in both French Polynesia and Micronesia were, if nothing else, exercises in the manipulation of time and space to secure particular results or to satisfy particular sentiments in fundamental political relationships. Any analysis of style and circumstances in either French Polynesia or Micronesia makes for good copy, but must by necessity distinguish the differences which characterizes these two unique areas of the Pacific.

The circumstances of official American involvement in Micronesia are generally well-known. Beginning with the American victory at Manila Bay in 1898, the Spanish began to withdraw from their centuries-old position in the insular Pacific. With the expulsion of the Germans in 1918 and likewise with the Japanese in 1945, the United States came to administer Micronesia as a "strategic trust." Significantly, since then, Micronesia, especially the Northern Marianas, has encountered an extraordinary variety of colonial administrations and all within a comparatively brief period of time. These colonial administrations left a remarkable legacy of cultural, economic and biological intervention in island societies. The uncertainty of the past thus created the certainty

of the future in that change extends the time and space of the present. If Micronesians are to assume control of their future, they must manipulate time according to their own schedule, thus commanding a position of advantage. Indeed, the manipulation of the time and space of one people by another lies at the heart of any definition of colonialism. If nothing else, the American interest in Micronesia's future has been marked by a series of plans, that unique phenomenon or administrative ritual of predicting the future by analyzing the present (Kent 1982:1-25). Perhaps the most notorious one of all, the Solomon Plan of 1963 noted:

American and Micronesian officials in the area appear still to be thinking in terms of independence for Micronesia as an eventual, distant goal and there appears to have been little attempt to direct Micronesians toward thinking about eventual affiliation with the United States. In the absence of further action, the Mission believes that the momentum of previous attitudes and policies which did not involve the concept of affiliation will be hard to overcome.

It can be stated quite unequivocally that the masses of Micronesia are not only not concerned with the political future but also are not even aware of it. They simply live in the present reality of the "American time" that has replaced the "Japanese time." The earlier German and Spanish times are dimly, if at all, remembered (McHenry 1975: Appendix 1).

Though the impact of the Solomon report upon U.S. decision-makers is not determinable, it nonetheless underscored a feeling that the nature of time and space for Micronesia was changing. In retrospect, the planning

process was probably the single most unique feature of American decolonial policy. Through such a mechanism the future, it was hoped, could be better ordered to achieve or avoid particular results. Such plans, in effect, became the proposed charters of the future.

The establishment of the Congress of Micronesia in 1967 was significant for a variety of reasons. First, it marked the hope that there could be some "unity in diversity" among the Micronesian political elites. Second, the Congress became a ready forum for the initiation of proposals for the future political status of the islands. Third, it legitimized the new political leaders vis-a-vis their respective constituencies and the Administering Authority. As one experienced commentator remarked:

The educated elite of Micronesia is, in a sense, an innovative group. They are revolutionary in character; they are demanding changes. Circumstances have thrown them into the role of opponents of the status quo and the Trust Territory bureaucracy, thus making them instruments of change. Because Micronesia has long been a static society, there is a need for innovators who can help bring about changes and make plans for the future. ... No society is likely to renew itself unless its dominant orientation is to the future. This does not mean ignoring the past completely, but the society that is capable of continuous growth and renewal not only is oriented toward the future, but looks ahead with some confidence. This is to say that an attitude of hopelessness will not bring about change. A society capable of continuous growth and renewal not only feels at home with the future, it accepts, even welcomes, the ideas that the future may bring (Heine 1974:65-66).

By 1967, the future became the subject of the present. The establishment of the Congress of Micronesia's Future Political Status Commission created a vehicle (or oracle) for Micronesian aspirations concerning change and its work product would serve as the predictions of the mythical realities of the "alternative destinations" open to Micronesia (deSmith 1970:172). In that same year, the United Nations Visiting Mission commented:

During its visit to Washington D.C., the Mission was told by an official of the Department of State that the United States Government anticipated that the inhabitants of the Territory would be called upon to decide their political future within a reasonable period of time. This did not mean, he said, "in the distant future." The precise timing of the act of self-determination would depend largely upon the wishes of the people expressed through the Congress of Micronesia. The rate of development of a sense of community among the many islands and the progress of the Congress of Micronesia would be relevant to this. The United States Government believed it would be premature to make any definite recommendations regarding the Territory's future status...

The Mission took every opportunity to test public opinion in the Territory about the possible future status to which the people aspired. The result showed that many had no clear idea about the possible alternatives open to them nor about the implications which the various options would carry for them. Most of them realized the extent of their heavy dependence upon the Administering Authority and seemed to have a genuine appreciation of the United States administration, but were glad of the special consideration and protection afforded them by their status as a Trust Territory. Perhaps the most common reaction was to ask "Why is the United Nations rushing us? We are in no

hurry." ... And many said they would like the United Nations trusteeship to continue without being prepared to suggest any definite period. They repeated the question: "Why is the United Nations rushing us? What is the hurry?" (1967:T/1668.47 emphasis added)

It thus seems clear that while Micronesian elites were anxious to precipitate change, many other Micronesians were still situated in a "motionless present, a vectorless now," in a state of permanent transition. As the Nathan report of 1967 observed:

The Trust Territory is in the process of reevaluating its major politics and programs and expanding its role in development. Political conditions in Micronesia are now beset with uncertainty as the traditional political structures yield to the impact of modern economic pressures and burgeoning education needs. The newly created District Legislatures and the Congress of Micronesia are still feeling their way, deciding what they are going to do and how...

Some of the leaders realize that the recent expansion in mass "American type" education will rapidly erode the ancient traditions and institutions, and they voice concern about the kind of economic and social system that will replace the one being rapidly destroyed. They wonder if a new system for providing social, economic and political harmony will emerge to fill the void (Nathan 1967:47).

Once the direction of their future political status was established, the process of drafting constitutions and negotiating political relationships began in earnest. The process was a period of minimal time, the prologue of denouement, for Micronesian elites who if nothing

else, realized that the charters for the reordering of Micronesia's time and space were being decided. It is important to emphasize that both sides of the negotiating table were under no definite time pressures to procure a final work product. Samuel McPhetres, the Program Developer and Researcher for the Education for Self-Government Program, Trust Territory Government explained in 1976:

We have no fixed deadlines to work against. If you take any African country, if you take any of the places under the British or French colonialism where this type of process took place, you'll find that one of the great advantages of it was that they knew already, the date which the status they were in would terminate and the new one would begin. It would be administrative fiat. The colonial power would tell you, "You will be independent by 1977. Now go to work!" And so they'd mount a program aiming at that particular thing and you'd know ahead of time when the plebiscites and the referenda, and so forth, were to take place. We don't know any single date for sure (Nufer, 1978:97).

Such sentiments as expressed permitted procrastination in the process. The efforts to draft a Micronesian constitution was undertaken with a spirit of optimism, but with the intention by many of the Micronesian delegates to manipulate time to their own advantage. The withdrawal of the Northern Marianas from the convention met with no opposition and little comment, though such a move marked a significant change in American policy. In retrospect, one participant intimately familiar with the proceedings, noted that underlying the whole constitutional effort "was the tension of nearly a decade of inconclusive

negotiations between Micronesian and United States' representatives over the unresolved future status of Micronesia." It seemed that the entire logic of drafting the political charter of the future "was probably premised as much upon necessity as upon the compatibility with the widespread Micronesian tendency to temporize when confronted with matters of the moment, relying on the passage of time as an element of itself to contribute to their mitigation if not solution" (LeMonde September 1, 1970).

By mid-1976, the Administering Authority, through then Director of Territorial Affairs Fred Zeder, announced to the Congress of Micronesia that the Trusteeship Agreement would be terminated in 1981. Whether this policy announcement was made as a corollary to the Northern Marianas separation from the Trust Territory is uncertain, but it did signify that the United States was attempting to regain control of time and space as it affected the future status negotiations. In mid-1982, Zeder, now the ambassador and personal representative of the President of the United States, signed the Compact of Free Association with Palau, the Marshalls, and the Federated States of Micronesia. In this respect, the divisions of space were clearly determined and the parameters of time delineated in precisely worded provisions.

While the Micronesian case may be termed as the "management of space through the manipulation of time," the French Polynesian example could be characterized in almost obverse terms — the "management of time through the manipulation of space." Unlike most of Micronesia, the nature of

colonial rule in French Polynesia has been singularly unitary. The imposition of the French protectorate over Tahiti and the Marquesas in 1842 marked the beginning of "direct rule." Traditional authority declined rapidly and by 1888 was administratively eliminated by the annexation of the islands by France.

French colonial rule may be distinguished from its American counterpart in Micronesia in several ways. Aside from the obvious differences in scale and time, Tahiti became a permanent settlement of expatriate transients, who for the most part, came to exercise political control of major institutions, the most important of which were the public and private school systems. Within the past two decades, another source of metropolitan intrusion into the islands appeared in 1963 with military and technological infrastructure created by the nuclear testing program. The activities and facilities of the test project enhanced the perception that France clearly intended to monopolize the time and space of the islands to suit its own national and international objectives. The acquisition of the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls from territorial control and the construction of permanent facilities on Hao and Mangareva were the advance measures of space manipulation. Additional infrastructure created at Fa'a'a and Pirae districts were indications that the testing program would be an effort of long duration. The extensive public works projects initiated with metropolitan funds and equipment had additional effects. Access to and from the outer islands improved considerably, thus extending by way of metaphor, the beach to the horizon.

French Polynesian aspirations for greater political autonomy have included the meaning of time and space management in their rhetoric, though greater emphasis has been placed on utilizing institutional means for effecting change and for pressing their case for either autonomy or independence. Curiously however, those very institutions, spelled out in the Constitution of the Fifth French Republic, are the time and space charters which preclude change. More precisely, unlike the Trusteeship Agreement which contemplates some movement towards change in political status, the present French Constitution provides no mechanism for independence. There are, however, examples of political flexibility which bear on this subject. When Djigouti and the Cormoro islands in eastern Africa moved from territorial status to internal autonomy and eventual independence, the interested leadership in French Polynesia (and New Caledonia) took particular delight that such a scenario could convincingly be adopted with respect to their own circumstances.

Several distinguishing factors were articulated by the metropolitan government which rejected the extension of internal autonomy to the French Pacific territories. First, the eastern African territories were predominately Muslim and assimilation had been negligible or non-existent. Second, the wishes of French colons in the Comoros have been accomodated by separating the island of Mayotte from the new independent state. French Polynesia (and perhaps New Caledonia) was unilaterally determined to be an assimilated territory whose patriotism to France had been clearly demonstrated during the course of two world

wars. Lacking the constitutional means of change, the French Polynesian autonomists have had to rely upon ideology and political opportunities to press their case. The remarks of then French Polynesia deputy Francis Sanford were especially instructive of this:

I accuse the French government of despising the Tahitians and ridiculing their representatives. For three years I have voted in support of the government...I and my friends have struggled to gain internal autonomy for the territory. We have asked for no more than... an executive elected wholly by the (territorial) assembly and for regional competence for internal affairs... Can it be reasonably assumed that our problems can be regulated in Paris? ... For three years we have met with a refusal on the part of the central government to carry on a dialogue... Patience has its limits and today these limits have been reached (Meller 1983:58).

With time comes some change. Independence as a political goal became illusory as the nature of economic dependence (or perceptions thereof) expands to fill the time allotted.

... a segment of the Polynesian population then and perhaps even now, has been very timid about the idea of independence. It is this timidity that the French have played on to keep Polynesia tightly bound to them (Finney 1979:20).

To cast this matter in considerably larger terms and in greater perspective:

... relations with colonial peoples are the result of past history and not of the application of roles or performance of a contract. It is a fairly simple matter to alter a contract, but it is well-nigh impossible to forecast what effect this alteration will have on the course of events (Mannoni 1956:196).

The psychology of dependence is not only a matter of attitudes, but clearly a state of mind induced by a reluctant loss of control over one's time and space to another. French Polynesian autonomists and even the advocates of independence have resisted the idea of preparing a temporal agenda, but rather have left that matter to the French administration. At least by 1977, the metropolitan government enacted a territorial bureaucracy.

There is yet another facet to real and perceived notions of economic dependence. While territorial-metropolitan dialogue has been a rhetorical mirror-image, the French authorities have argued that political independence cannot succeed in view of island dependence on metropolitan subsidies. The local leadership has argued the obverse, but admittedly in less convincing terms. Both sides of the debate, however, fully recognized that the time matrix for economic prosperity is less subject to control than an agenda for political independence. The making of economic conditions is a primary feature of such systems as is currently operative in the territory. Thus as long as a dominant segment of the island population can be mesmerized by the lure of material goods, its advocates can manage time to its advantage by prolonging the present.

Returning to the issue of the French nuclear testing program and its relationship to greater local autonomy, a salient feature emerges as significant. While local (and even regional) opposition to the tests have been vocal, they have been only intermittently so. There appears to be a definite uncertainty as to whether an end to the tests will come when French Polynesia is independent, as was the case with Algeria, or whether Tahiti will become independent when the tests end. It is clear that as far as the French military interests are concerned the latter scenario is preferable. That would mean that a prolongation of the present is the prevailing scenario on the political agenda. As the present is extended, the number of French colons in Tahiti will increase and their political and economic weight will create another dimension to the situation.

As with Micronesia, French Polynesians have had considerable difficulty in overcoming the influence of national defense interests, especially when such interests are inaccessible or otherwise veil themselves behind another administrative agency. These parallels aside, colonialism and the colonial presence in the Pacific creates the boundaries of the past and the present, and the space where the future can not begin.

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